

## THE ORIGIN OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE ACCORDING TO ATHANASIUS KIRCHER'S THEORY

BOLESŁAW SZCZESNIAK

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

EASTERN ASIA, often called Magna Tartaria, was the subject of many a fantastic speculation advanced by various scholars toward the end of the XVIth and the beginning of the XVIIth century. Among these scholars was Claude Duret (d. 1611), the author of the important treatise for historians of linguistics, *Thrésor de l'histoire des langues de l'univers*, published in Cologne in 1613. In his account of Far Eastern languages he put Chinese and Japanese in the category of languages to which also belong the unarticulated voices of animals and birds. This example of the paucity of European knowledge of Far Eastern languages and civilization was typical, generally speaking, until the middle of the seventeenth century, when the first substantial reports on China and Japan by missionaries and travellers were published in the various languages of Europe. These reports naturally attracted amateur savants to the study of Chinese civilization, and drew the attention of professional scholars of the second part of the century. The question of the origin of Chinese and other languages of the Far East became a matter of particular interest.

Men of letters in the second half of the seventeenth century had arrived at a peculiar understanding of the universality of human history, because for them the history of any culture possessed a universal character in the common origin of mankind. Their search, therefore, for the beginnings of China itself naturally took on the character of a search for its universality and its ancient similarities with the culture of other countries.

Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680)<sup>1</sup> was the first

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bolesław Szczesniak, "Athanasius Kircher's China illustrata," *Osiris* (1951). Carlos Sommervogel, S. J., *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*. Nouvelle édition, 10 vols. (Bruxelles-Paris, 1890-1909), 5 fascicules *Corrections et additions à la Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*. *Supplément au De Backer-Sommervogel*, par Ernest M. Rivière, S. J. (Toulouse, 1911, 1913, 1914-1917, 1911-1930, 1930), see vol. IV, cols. 1046-1077; *Nouvelle biographie générale* (Paris, Frères Didot, 1855-1866), vol. XXVII, cols. 769-776; *Larousse du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris,

who started the long-disputed and still unsolved question of the origin of Chinese culture and writing. But his turning to that question was primarily influenced by Egyptologic studies, which were, so he thought, a basis for the understanding of the beginnings of the human race and the early spread of civilization.

For Athanasius Kircher the study of Egyptology was not merely to indulge his interest in the past, not merely the activity of an historical scholar who attempted discoveries in that almost unexplored field. His interest was to seek out the cultural past of the human race, especially that of ancient Egypt, which, as he saw it, stood nearest to the history of the creation of man and to the diffusion of the peoples in the world after the Deluge.

For Kircher, the Bible was a primary source of information for the study of the beginnings of mankind and of early historic Egypt. It brought him, therefore, chronologically and methodically to Pharaonic Egypt, so mature in many respects, and the first country of advanced civilization which influenced, in his opinion, other neighboring regions, such as Syria, Greece, Persia, India, and even China.

Kircher considered himself a polyhistor,<sup>2</sup> com-

1928-1933), vol. IV, p. 249; *Der Grosse Herder* (Freiburg im Breisgau 1931-1933), vol. VI, col. 1416; *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada Europeo-Americana* (Barcelona, 1926-1930), vol. XXVIII, part II, p. 3454; *Der Grosse Brockhaus* (Leipzig, 1928-1935), vol. X, p. 172; *Dictionnaire d'archéologie Chrétienne et de liturgie* (Paris, 1924-), vol. VIII, part I, cols. 772-805; *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1930-1938), vol. V, col. 1052; *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1907-1914), vol. VIII, pp. 661-662; *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th edition, Chicago, 1936), vol. XIII, pp. 410-411; *Kirchenlexikon oder Encyclopädie der katholischen Theologie und ihrer Hilfswissenschaften* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1882-1903), vol. VII, cols. 716-717; *Enciclopedia Italiana* (Roma, 1929-1938), vol. XX, p. 209; *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig, 1875-1912), vol. XVI (1882), pp. 1-4; *Biographie universelle (Michaud) ancienne et moderne* (Paris, 1842-1865), vol. XXI, pp. 642-646.

<sup>2</sup> A. Kircher was of a confident opinion about himself and the importance of his writings and achievements.



The frontispiece of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* representing Kircher as Oedipus with a list of the languages he knew and of the esoteric sciences of which he was master. The languages of Kircher: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Chaldaic, Syriac, Arabic, Samaritan, Armenian, Egyptian Coptic, Persian, Ethiopic, Italian, German, Spanish, French, Portuguese. The arcana: Egyptian Wisdom, Phoenician Theology, Chaldean Astrology, Persian Magic, Hebrew Cabala, Pythagorean Mathematics, Greek Theosophy, Mythology, Arabian Alchemy, Latin Philosophy.

petent to write with authority not only on mathematics, but also on such subjects as theology, alchemy, philology, astrology, geology, prestidigitation, medicine, and last, but not least, the study of the Near and Far East. Comparative philology made him turn to Egypt, which in his opinion was first among all ancient cultures. The idea of Egypt's cultural primacy was expounded in his various Egyptological writings, where among other theories he also maintained that Chinese culture was derived from, or at least influenced by, ancient Egypt.

God's punishment of human pride, as *Genesis*<sup>3</sup> tells us about the Tower of Babel, resulted in the confusion of tongues, and this was a basic factor for Kircher in evolving the beginnings of the diversity of languages. This he tried to prove as early as 1636, when he published his *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus*,<sup>4</sup> and explained the "beginning, age, vicissitudes, differences, and establishment of hieroglyphics." With the advancement of his knowledge of languages, especially Hebraic, Coptic, Syriac and Arabic, Kircher systematized

He wrote, as I suppose, an autobiography which was published anonymously after his death, *Vita admodum reverendi P. A. Kircheri*, Augsburg, 1684. A copy of this rare booklet is preserved in the British Museum with mutilated title page. He should be credited with a good sense of balanced modesty and sincerity of self-appreciation.

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis*, XI, 1, "And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech"; XI, 9, "... Because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth." Kircher followed the Biblical interpretation of the human race. He might also have been influenced by St. Augustin's *De Civitate Dei*, XVI, 4, XIX, 7, which following *Genesis* explained the diversity of languages as being caused by human pride in founding the city of Babylon, and the tower "whose top shall reach the heavens." St. Augustin accepted Hebrew as the original language of the first man. (*De civitate Dei*, XVI, 11.). Rabbinistic writings and the Talmud propound the same explanation. On St. Augustin's linguistic interests see Casmir Golebiewski, "Le Language d'après St. Augustin," *Bulletin de la Société Polonaise Linguistique*, fasc. III, pp. 1-37. Cracovie, 1932.

<sup>4</sup> *Athanasii Kircheri Fuldensis Buchonii e Soc. Jesu Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus. Ad Eminentiss. Principem S. R. E. Cardinalem Franciscum Barberinum. in quo cum linguae Coptae, sive Aegyptiacae, quondam Pharaonicae, origo, aetas, vicissitudo, inclinatio; tum hieroglyphicae litteraturae instauratio, uti per varia variarum eruditionumque difficilimarum specimina, ita nova quoque et insolita exhibentur.* Romae, Typis S. Cong. de propag: Fide. 1636. Superiorum permissu.

his approach to Egyptian studies, especially with regard to the language itself.<sup>5</sup> In his voluminous work, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*,<sup>6</sup> published at Rome in 1652-1654, he employed "scientific criticism"

<sup>5</sup> See his study *A. Kircheri Linguae Aegyptiacae restituta opus tripartitum; quo linguae Coptae . . . ex abstrusis Arabum monumentis plena instauratio continetur. Cui adnectitur supplementum earum rerum, quae in Prodomo Copto, et opere hoc . . . omissa vel obscurius tradita sunt . . .* Romae, 1643.

<sup>6</sup> References and quotations are taken from the British Museum copy (581.1.21.). The baroque title of Kircher's work explains the contents and deserves to be given in full: *Athanasii Kircheri // E. Soc. Jesv, // Oedipvs // Aegyptiacvs, // Hoc Est // Vniuersalis Hieroglyphicae Veterum // Doctrinae temporum iniuria abolitae // Instauratio. // Opus ex omni Orientalium doctrina & sapientia // conditum, nec non viginti diuersarum linguarum // autoritate stabilitum, // Felicibus Auspicijs // Ferdinandi III. // Avstriaci // Sapientissimi & Inuicissimi // Romanorum Imperatoris semper Augusti // tenebris erutum, // Atque Bono Reipublicae Literariae consecratum. // Tomus I. // [flourion and line] // Romae, // Ex Typographia Vitalis Mascardi, // MDC LII. // Superiorvm Permissv. //*

The Title-page of the second volume is different, according to the contents: *Athanasii Kircheri // E. Soc. Jesv // Oedipi // Aegyptiaci // Tomus Secundus. // Gymnasivm // Sive // Phrontisterion Hieroglyphicum in Duodecim // Classes distributum, // In Quibvs // Encyclopaedia Aegyptiorum, id est, Veterum Hebraeorum, Chaldaeorum, Aegyptiorum, Graecorum, coeterorumque Orientalium // recondita Sapientia, hucusque temporum iniuria perditam, perditam, per // artificiosum sacrarum Sculpturarum contextum de- // monstrata, instauratur, // Felicibus Auspicijs // Ferdinandi III. // Caesaris. // Pars Prima // Complectens Sex priores Classes. // [line] // Romae, // Ex Typographia Vitalis Mascardi, Anno M DC L III. // Superiorvm Permissv. //*

The second part of the second volume (separately published): *Athanasii Kircheri // Soc. Jesv // Oedipi // Aegyptiaci // Tomi Secundi // Pars Altera // Complectens Sex posteriores // Classes // Felicibus Auspicijs // Ferdinandi III. // Caesaris. // [the crest of Emp. Ferd. III] // [line] // Romae, // Ex Typographia Vitalis Mascardi, Anno M DC L III. // Superiorvm Permissv. //*

The third volume: *Athanasii Kircheri // Soc. Jesv // Oedipi // Aegyptiaci // Tomus III. // Theatrum Hieroglyphicvm, // Hoc est, // Noua & hucusque intentata // Obeliscorum // Coeterorumque Hieroglyphicorum Monumentorum, quae tum Romae, tum in Aegypto, ac // celebrioribus Europae Musaeis adhuc // supersunt, // Interpretatio // Juxta sensum Physicum, Tropologicum, Mysticum, Hi- // storicum, Politicum, Magicum, Medicum, Mathematicum, Cabalisticum, Hermeticum, Sophericum, Theo- // sophericum; ex omni Orientalium doctrina // & sapientia demonstrata. // Felicibus Auspicijs // Ferdinandi III. // Caesaris. // [line] // Romae, // Es Typographia Vitalis Mascardi, Anno à Partu Virgineo MDCLIV. // Superiorvm Permissv. //*

(according to the standards of his time) in the field of linguistics, and explored all contemporary knowledge of recent discoveries about the East. His work was an attempt to present the *systema* of philology. Also he later returned to this particular question in 1663, when he tried to reduce all languages to four main groups, in *Polygraphia nova et universalis*.<sup>7</sup>

Kircher's philological systematics, and the practical application thereof, were supplemented by *China illustrata*,<sup>8</sup> 1667, in which this laborious polyhistor found space to dwell on the Chinese language and its relationship to the Egyptian. Kircher could never pass by the new discoveries of travellers and missionaries in the Far East without a study of them. His interest in things Chinese eventually helped him to strengthen his theory of the ancient Biblical world as it was expressed in Pharaon's realm. Ancient Chinese culture and language proved to be for Kircher an offspring from a primeval language, through the language of Egypt, or under its influence in the time of the dispersion of the people in the post-Babylon period.

The theory of Kircher in its relation to Chinese culture and language was so novel and exotic to seventeenth century savants that it opened a new period in the Sinological studies about China's origin. It had a strong effect on learned writings and interpretations, from Kircher's time to the end of the nineteenth century. Today, with the advancement of studies in comparative philology and related subjects, Kircher's theory has lost its value, and has passed into oblivion. For the historian of philology, however, Kircher still holds his importance in spite of his many shortcomings,

misconceptions, and credulities. He is forgotten by some scientific philologists and criticized by others; but nevertheless, he deserves to be recognized as an outstanding writer and student in many fields of human knowledge in the seventeenth century, a century when man wrestled with the truth, and when the experimental method was not fully established.<sup>9</sup> Kircher's interest in Chinese and Far Eastern languages had far greater influence than is sometimes realized. Consequently, on account of his Egyptological works, as well as of his valuable compilation of *China illustrata*,<sup>10</sup> he belongs undoubtedly to the history of Sinology, and his theory of Egyptian-Chinese relations in prehistoric times deserves the attention of serious students.

\* \* \*

As we have said, Kircher's knowledge and systematized approach to the diversity of languages led him to a definite statement of the theory of the Egyptian origin of the Chinese language and culture in his great work *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*.<sup>11</sup> He held that even the Chinese religious cult, or as he expressed it himself, "cultus idolorum,"<sup>12</sup> was brought from Egypt. He tried to prove this (pp. 398-412) by logical and analytical reasoning, deriving most of his arguments from the reports of missionaries working in China and Japan. He found three arguments to prove this assertion. His first argument was that Chinese propitiated angered gods or attracted well-disposed ones, according to the Egyptian custom. His second argument was that the same gods were common to the Chinese, the Egyptians, and even the Greeks. He said that there is no doubt, as is evident from the study of the pictures sent by the Jesuits from the "metropolitan city of Nankin," that in contemporary China there are temples to the old gods of Egypt and Greece such as Mars, Fortuna, Jovis, Atlantis, the spirits of water, weather, and

<sup>7</sup> Athanasii Kircheri e Soc. Iesu polygraphia nova et universalis ex combinatoria arte detecta. Qua quivis etiam linguarum quantumvis imperitus triplici methodo . . . scribere et respondere posse docetur et demonstratur . . . Romae, Ex typographia Varesii. MDCLXIII.—For the evaluation of the *Polygraphia* see George E. McCracken, "Athanasius Kircher's Universal Polygraphy," *Isis*, vol. 39 (1948), pp. 215-228.

<sup>8</sup> Athanasii Kircheri // E Soc. Jesu // China // Monumentis, // Qua // Sacris quæ Profanis, // Nec non variis // Naturæ & Artis // Spectaculis, // Aliarumque rerum memorabilium // Argumentis // Illustrata, // Auspiciis // Leopoldi Primi, // Roman. Imper. Semper Augusti, // Munificentissimi Mecaenatis. // [engraving with motto: A Solis Ortu usque ad Occasum // Laudabile Nomen Dñi.] // Amstelodami, // [rule] // Apud Jacobum à Meurs, in fossa vulgò de Keysergracht, // Anno M.DC.LXVII. //

<sup>9</sup> Prof. H. Butterfield gives illuminating chapters on the XVIIth century advance in science and methodology in his book *The Origin of Modern Science* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1949), V, VII, X, XII.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Henri Cordier, *Mélanges d'histoire et de géographie orientales* (Paris, 1914), I, p. 75, et seq.; *Histoire générale de la Chine* (Paris, 1920), I, pp. 10-13; "Travaux historiques sur la Chine," extrait de la *Revue historique*, XVIII (1882), 143-170.

<sup>11</sup> Vol. I, pp. 396-417.

<sup>12</sup> P. 401, "Sinenses idolorum cultum ab Aegyptiis hausisse, probatur tribus argumentis . . ."

others.<sup>13</sup> His third argument was that the beginning of Chinese civilization in Egypt could be proved both by the similarity of rites and ceremonies and by the similarity of the hieroglyphics of Egypt and the characters of China.<sup>14</sup>

Tertium argumentum est, quod praeter literas, quibus hieroglyphica Aegyptiorum proxime affectant, ut in secunda *Oedypi* parte ostendemus, ritus et caerimonias easdem pene habent cum Aegyptiis.<sup>15</sup>

He applied the same reasoning to the religion of Japan, which took "pagan idols" from China. Strange to say, Kircher found similarities and imitations of Egyptian polytheic religion not only in Asiatic countries, but also in the New World. In the following chapter (p. 417) he discussed the parallels of American and Egyptian beliefs (*De religione Americanorum Aegypticae parallela*). This argument supported the principle that the alphabet follows religion.

He dwelt on the origin of Chinese writing (vol. II, part II)<sup>16</sup> and based his hypothesis on the Bible. Accordingly, he said that the third son of Noah, Cham, immigrated with his tribe from Egypt to Persia and Bactria<sup>17</sup> and settled in the vicinity of the "kingdom of Mogor," through which the knowledge of hieroglyphs penetrated to China proper. As a result, Egyptian as well as Chinese writing got their similarity at first in the primitive pictorial form, and afterwards also the ideogrammatic form; both had a common beginning. Chinese ideograms, with the development of their use and with the rise of culture, were transferred into "dots and lines," and thus lost their pictorial character. To give additional support to his views, he included a treatise on the anatomy of Chinese characters which he had obtained from Michael Boym, an outstanding Polish sinologue of the XVIIth century.<sup>18</sup> This treatise

was "De veterum Sinicorum characterum anatomia,"<sup>19</sup> part of which Kircher inserted in his *China illustrata*, afterwards published in Amsterdam in 1667.<sup>20</sup>

This material<sup>21</sup> constitutes chapter II, entitled "Quomodo hieroglyphica a caeteris diversarum gentium literis distinguantur, et potissimum in quo characteres Sinensium ab hieroglyphicis differant."<sup>22</sup> Here Kircher discussed how Egyptian hieroglyphs differ from various alphabets, and especially from Chinese characters. Kircher followed the visual method of comparing graphic elements of Oriental and European scripture, and naturally he did not find distinct differences between early Egyptian and Chinese pictorial writing.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, he found them similar and therefore of the same origin. He illustrated his account with cuts taken from a chapter on the formation of Chinese characters, "Liber de formandarum literarum Chinicarum ratione," of Michael Boym's manuscript *Delucidatio summaria rerum Sinicarum*. But he did not realize that these cuts represented ornamental fancy and magic scripts. Outside of the exotic novelty of

*JAOS* 67 (1947), 160-165; Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine* (2 vols., Shanghai, 1932-1934), vol. I, pp. 269-276.

<sup>10</sup> *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, vol. II, part II, pp. 12-21. Kircher gives also (p. 10), an introduction to Boym's treatise and says that he took only that part which is concerned with his hypothesis. Boym's MS. was not published.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. pp. 225-237, *Athanasii Kircheri e Soc. Jesu. China monumentis, qua sacris qua profanis, nec non variis naturae et artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata, auspiciis Leopoldi I, Roman. Imper. semper augusti, munificentissimi mecenatis. Amstelodami, Apud Jacobum à Meurs, in fossa vulgo de Keyzersgracht, anno M. DC. LXVII.*

<sup>21</sup> Plates and the whole material were also reprinted in Jansonius's edition of *China illustrata*, 1667, Amsterdam, and in the Dutch translation, *Tooneel van China*, Amsterdam, 1668, and in the French version *La Chine illustrée*, Paris, 1670; cf. Cordier, *Bibliotheca Sinica*, I, cols. 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> Pp. 10-21, vol. II of the British Museum copy.

<sup>23</sup> See *China illustrata*, p. 225; H. Cordier, *Histoire générale de la Chine* (4 vols., Paris, 1920), vol. I, p. 12, "Ce que Kircher connaissait de la Chine, il le tenait du P. Michel Boym, Polonais, envoyé d'Extrême-Orient en mission en Europe par ses supérieurs . . ." See also his "Travaux historiques sur la Chine," *Mélanges d'histoire et de géographie orientales*, vol. I, pp. 75-116 (extrait de la *Revue Historique*, Paris, 1914, vol. XVIII, 1882, pp. 143-170): "*China illustrata*, basée surtout sur des mémoires du P. Michel Boym, polonais, . . .," p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>15</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Pp. 8-21; *Oedipus* was published (1652-1654), in three *volumina*, vol. II is in two parts; and is bound altogether in four separate volumes. My quotations are after the copy preserved in the British Museum, press mark of General Catalogue: 581.1.21.

<sup>17</sup> P. 11, "transtulit colonias suas."

<sup>18</sup> See Robert Chabrié, *Michel Boym Jésuite Polonais et le fin des Mings en Chine, 1646-1662* (Paris: Pierre Bossuet, 1933); Boleslaw Szczesniak, "The Beginnings of Chinese Lexicography in Europe with Particular Reference to the Work of Michel Boym (1612-1653),"

the pictures, which were characteristically attractive to Kircher's mentality, he was primarily interested in explaining Chinese-Egyptian affinities. Here the polyhistor, placing confidence in Boym's material which he did not understand, found essential Egyptian influence on the formation of these characters and concluded that their origin was in Egypt.

To many of his contemporaries Kircher was one of the greatest scholars in the world. No wonder he enjoyed the fame and favours of two Popes, an Emperor, the aristocracy, and scholars. It seems that the old polyhistor, however modest, was somewhat influenced by human glory. He liked to dedicate his works to people of outstanding authority who undoubtedly contributed to their costly editions. His *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, a sumptuous and exceedingly luxurious book, was dedicated to the Emperor Ferdinand III, and even its separate parts were additionally dedicated to people of fame and glory like Cardinal Francesco Barberini, Princes Matthew and Leopold de Medici, and Bishop and Abbot Stanislaus Pstrokonski, the great Maecenas of science in Poland. The whole work is magnificently and profusely illustrated with maps, figures, engravings, and cuts. In the introduction, Kircher called himself "Oedipus Aegyptiacus," and displayed the allegory in the frontispiece engraving by Caninius (see illustration). Among the various panegyrics and laudatory dedications written in twenty languages there is also an elegy written in Chinese<sup>24</sup> with Latin translation and transliteration by the celebrated Michael Boym.<sup>25</sup>

\* \* \*

Some years later, in 1679, Kircher returned to his search for the beginnings of the human race and of languages, when he published his *Turris Babel*.<sup>26</sup> Just as in his previous works on the

language and on the humanity of *Genesis*,<sup>27</sup> he repeated himself in part, and he now added new arguments. These were concerned with the anthropological and social causes for the variety of language (pp. 130-132). They are particularly interesting because they lead to an hypothesis about the origin of the Chinese and Tartar languages. For the first cause, he fixed upon the mixture of various nations in the time of great migrations. The second cause was the changes in the political status of nations and in the extent of their sovereignty. Each new ruler who subdued an alien nation tried to introduce his own vernacular language, and this resulted in a variety of forms and words, and even in the rise of new languages. The third cause was to be found in the destruction of nations by some public calamity, and the extinction of languages, of which only remnants are known ("paucae mortalium reliquiae superesse.") The fourth cause had to do with colonial possessions which remained under the alien rule of other countries. The language of such a country influenced the language of the ruling class itself. But, he insisted, all languages developed from the tongue created by God in Paradise, and this tongue was Hebrew.<sup>28</sup>

In book III, treating on the inclination, corruption, and annihilation of languages,<sup>29</sup> he dwelt on the beginning of "Indicas linguas."<sup>30</sup> These languages bordered on the barbarian tongues but did not have close affinities with them. Among the "Indian Languages" Kircher included Malayan, Commorin (Siamese?), Sanscrit, Peguan, Tonkinese, Tibetan, the Philippine languages, Japanese, and Chinese. He said that they all got their start from Old Chinese, and he tried to

*describuntur et explicantur. Auspiciis augustissimi et sapientissimi caesaris Leopoldi Primi mecenatis. Amstelodami, Ex officina Janssonio-Waesbergiana. Anno MDCLXXIX. Cum privilegiis.*

<sup>27</sup> *Turris Babel*, p. 14. He accepts that the sons of Noë, Sem, Cham, Japheth, migrated to various countries and constituted three different and main philological groups (Sem, Cham, Japheth). See also his treatise on Deluge and Noe's family in: *Arca Noë in tres libros digesta, quorum I de rebus quae ante Diluvium; II de iis, quae in ipso Diluvio ejusque duratione; III de iis, quae post Diluvium a Noëmo gesta sunt*. Amstelodami, 1675.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>29</sup> Liber III, *De inclinatione, corruptione, et interitu linguarum*, pp. 130-205.

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>24</sup> Vol. I, folio 31 v.-32 r.

<sup>25</sup> The same method of numbering characters and their Latin equivalents was adopted as in *China Illustrata* in the translation of the Hsi-an-fu Inscription; see B. Szczesniak, "The beginning of Chinese lexicography," pp. 163-164.

<sup>26</sup> *Athanasii Kircheri e Soc. Jesu turris Babel, sive archontologia quod priscorum post diluvium hominum vita, more rerumque gestarum magnitudo, secundo turris fabrica civitatumque exstructio, confusio linguarum, et inde gentium transmirationis, cum principalium inde enatorum idiomatum historia, multiplici eruditione*

demonstrate this point with some lexical material on the similarity of their sounds.<sup>31</sup>

Next, Kircher thought that the ancient Egyptian language, "lingua Aegyptiaca, seu Copta, quam et veteram Pharaonicam appellamus,"—became the protolanguage for Asia:<sup>32</sup>

Quemadmodum ab Asiae linguis primaevis initium duximus Polyglottias nostrae; ita hic reliquas in Oriente linguas ordine presequamur, quae tametsi toto, ut ajunt, coelo, ab Hebraicae linguae hucusque declarata loquela, et characteribus differant, uti sunt Armenica, Georgiana, Tartarica, Turcica, quia tamen et hae magna progenie ex corruptione unius cum alter foecundae sunt, illas ordine describemus.<sup>33</sup>

In *Turris Babel*, he dwelt on Hebraic as the first language of the human race.<sup>34</sup> Hebraic—"lingua Hebraica linguarum omnium prima"—gave birth to the original languages, which were called mothers of all languages, and which remained in use ever since the Babel time of confusion. Hebraic, however, is the first primogenial.

Simply repeating<sup>35</sup> the early linguistic interpretation of St. Augustine, followed until the seventeenth century by all writers,<sup>36</sup> Kircher set up in *Turris Babel* the following order of the beginning of mother-languages from Hebraic: 1) "[lingua] Chaldaica, 2) Samaritana seu Phoenicia [sic!], 3) Syriaca, 4) Arabica, 5) Aetiopica, 6) Persica seu Aelamilica, 7) Aegyptiaca, seu Copta, quam veteram Pharaonicam appellamus, 8) Armenica." From this last, through Old Tartar, the Tartar languages began.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 131b-132a, "Ad Indicas porro linguas quod attinet, prorsus barbaras, et quae nullam ad dictas jam linguas affinitatem habent, illarum pariter ingens multitudo et diversitas reperitur; uti sunt, Malaica, Commorina, Brachmanica, Peguana, Tunchinensis, Tibetana, Insularum Philippinarum, Japonica, Chinica, ex qua fere omnes originem suam traxerunt, ut ex Lexicis et Grammaticis eorum in sequentibus patebit."

<sup>32</sup> *Turris Babel*, p. 203.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>35</sup> *Turris Babel*, p. 193, caput I, *De lingua Hebraea linguarum omnium prima*. "Hebraeam linguam primigeniam, et a Deo Opt. Max. protoplastis insitam, ac proinde mundo coevam, nec non divino eloquio exornatam, jure uti dixi primigeniam esse, omnium SS. interpretum doctorumque communis sententia est, et vel ex ipsis primaevis nominibus, a Deo in sacra sua *Genesi* expositis, quam loculentissime patet."

<sup>36</sup> *Genesis*, VI-X; F. Vigoroux, *Dictionnaire de la Bible* (5 vols., Paris, 1895-1912), vol. II (1899), col. 920, furnishes the references of the Patristic explanation of the confusion of languages.

Tartar (sometimes he writes it Tatar) is the same language, he said, that the emperor of China used in edicts, written in parallel columns. Because of Kircher's ignorance of Chinese history, these edicts were for him a proof of language consanguinity. An additional, and, as he thought, more convincing document for his theory was the Nestorian Inscription of Hsi-an-fu,<sup>37</sup> written partly in Syrian together with a Chinese text and inscribed on the tablet which was erected in A. D. 781 near the city of Hsi-an, in China. This proved for him that Syrian was of Chaldean origin. The Chaldean of Kircher is closest to Aramaic; it is the language of pre-Babel Hebrew, which according to the Bible<sup>38</sup> is the primary language of mankind. Thus, he arrived at the order of origin for the Chinese and Tartar languages, although he did not specify what he meant by Tartar languages.

\* \* \*

Kircher not only attempted to offer the solution to the problem of the multiplicity of languages, but also to suggest a new approach to learning them easily. He was a typical seventeenth century synthesizer, and his universal learning corresponded to the spirit of the time. Kircher tried to establish the system of a basic dictionary for all languages, reducing them to the four main groups. According to his classification set up in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, to class b, or the second, belonged Tartar and Chinese, following Chaldean, Arabic, Armenian, Persian, and Turkish in that order. The Chaldean language was an offspring of old Egyptian, the language which also gave birth to languages of East Asia, to Chinese, and Tartar. In *Polygraphia nova*, accordingly, he said: "In Asia dictionarium II sufficiat transtulisse in praecipuas Asiae linguas ut in Chaldaicam, Arabicam, Armenicam, Persicam, Turcicam, Tartaricam, Sinicam."<sup>39</sup>

What the celebrated scholar of the Baroque period understood by the Tartar language is not easy to say. In his *China illustrata* he related, after Martini's *De bello Tartico*, the occupation of China (1644) by "Tartar" invaders, and he

<sup>37</sup> Kircher was interested in the Nestorian inscription, as early as 1636, when he treated that subject in *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus*, published in Rome, pp. 46-85.

<sup>38</sup> *Turris Babel*, p. 205.

<sup>39</sup> See p. 7, *Polygraphia nova*. Copy of New York Public Library,\* ICP. †.



also mentioned that Tartar armies abolished the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), and gradually subdued all China to their yoke. Of course, the Manchu armies of Nurhachi (d. 1625) and his successor who fought for the throne and the empire of China, were not Tartars in our modern understanding, and also not in any seventeenth century meaning. The name "Tartar" was applied to the Mongolians from the time of the invasion of Europe in 1223-1241. Their successors, the Golden Horde, remained in the vicinity of the Crimean Peninsula, and on the banks of the Volga river. They lost completely their Mongolian connections, and were more a Turkish mixture of steppe people of the Caspian or Azov regions than of Central Asian origin. The seventeenth century Polish wars in the lower Dniepr River were constantly termed Tartar wars in contemporary historical writings. Kircher simply accepted Martini's explanations of the Tungus Manchus as the successors of the thirteenth century Mongols who threatened China with invasion from the northern marginal zone of the Chinese empire, and who established their dynasty, the Yuan (1206-1364), in a manner similar to that of the Manchus in the middle of the seventeenth century. It is evident that for Martini the matter involved a question of confusion of race-distinction; but for Kircher, it was a misunderstanding of the language. Kircher therefore understood "lingua Tartarica" to be the language of the Manchus and to be a cognate with Mongolian, which for him was the same. He had as contemporaries Jesuit missionary linguists who knew Manchu, but there is no evidence that "Tartar" meant for Kircher the Manchu language only.

Another contemporary of Kircher was the famous Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688), a Belgian mathematician of outstanding ability, a prolific writer of treatises in Chinese on various subjects, and also the author of *Grammatica Tartarea*, the first Manchu grammar in Europe. Since Kircher could surely have known of the work of Verbiest and since he himself lived, as a professor of mathematics in the Collegio Romano, near the house of the Jesuit General in Rome, he certainly could have learned the difference between the language of the Mongols and the Manchu Tungus. This point, however, is not important. Whether he meant Manchu, or Mongolian, does not change the circumstance of the Kircherian theory of the origin

of Chinese and the other Far Eastern languages derived from the old Egyptian.

\* \* \*

There is another aspect of Kircher's interest in exotic languages, especially in Egyptian or Chinese. He studied hieroglyphs with the desire to penetrate into the secrets of magic symbolism. Most probably he was influenced by Josephus Pierius Valerianus (1477-1558), a Renaissance student of hieroglyphic symbolism.<sup>40</sup> He tended also to try to penetrate the long-lost hermetic knowledge of a spiritual and material world, once known by the Egyptian caste of priests. To read *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* is to be convinced of this aspect of Kircher's scholarship. An all-embracing and varied symbolism, magic of old, fantastic interpretation of ancient hieroglyphs, the search for the mysterious, all were expressed in the title of his *magnum opus* (*pars III*), which we may render into English as follows:

Oedipus of Egypt, or theater of hieroglyphs, it is a new and hitherto untouched interpretation of obelisks and hieroglyphic monuments, which hitherto remained in Egypt, Rome or in the more outstanding European museums,—explained according to their physical, figurative, mystic, historical, political, magical, medical, mathematical, cabalistical, hermetical, sophistical, theosophical, understanding; demonstrated from all oriental doctrine and wisdom.<sup>41</sup>

No wonder that Kircher's interest in the beginnings of Far Eastern civilization was called by his opponents fantastic. The first disagreement with Kircher's theory, however mild, was publicly expressed by the Belgian translator of the Confucianist canon, Philippe Couplet (1624-1692), and his collaborators (Prosperus Intorcetta, Christianus Herdtrich, and Franciscus Rougemont) in the renowned *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive scientia Sinensis latine exposita*, published in Paris, 1687, and dedicated to Louis XIV.<sup>42</sup> The intro-

<sup>40</sup> See his *Hieroglyphica, seu de sacris Aegyptiorum literis. Ejusdem alia opuscula. Hori Appolinis hieroglyphica. Ludovici Casanove hieroglyphica et emblemata medica* (Lyon: Paul Frelon, 1626). It is the fullest and best edition of all Valeriano's writings including his *Hieroglyphica* with six additional books never before published, and other works like Louis de Casaneuve's *Hieroglyphs and Medical Emblems*. This work constitutes the fullest repertory of Renaissance emblems and symbolism. Before Champollion deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphs, they were interpreted as symbols of mystic significance.

<sup>41</sup> For the full Latin title see footnote 6.

<sup>42</sup> For contents and bibliography see also, H. Cordier,



ductory essay to this great work (Proemialis declaratio), among other chapters, contains one (pp. LXIX-LXXIII) which even in its title refutes the theory of Kircher:

"Ex libris Sinarum authenticis concluditur nullum eisdem fuisse cum aliis nationibus commercium." So, Couplet and his distinguished co-translators and co-editors, as Sinologues, authoritatively explained the absence of foreign borrowings in the development of ancient Chinese culture, as is proved "from its authentic scriptures." They remarked also that Chinese commercial relations would have been with the Assyrians, rather than with the Egyptians, since the former are nearer to China. Why, therefore, they maintain, must China have had such relations with remote Egypt, and why, then, did not Egypt borrow from China, if there are some similarities between Chinese and Egyptian hieroglyphs? <sup>43</sup>

The first strong opponent of Kircher's theory was the temperamental French scholar, Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749), Secrétaire Perpétuel de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, in his paper read during the sitting of the Academy on 6th December, 1718, and published in the *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (vol. VI, 1729, pp. 609-635), under the title "Reflexions sur les principes généraux de l'art d'écrire, et en particulier sur les fondemens de l'écriture chinoise." He rightly observed <sup>44</sup> that "Le P. Kircher est d'un autre avis; mais il paroît en cette occasion avoir un peu trop donné à son imagination." <sup>45</sup>

For it was Kircher who started the controversy over the origin from ancient Egypt of the Chinese language, writing, and civilization. And in spite of his approach to the question, based mostly on imaginary premises, Kircher's hypothesis found

many followers in his time and until the XIXth century. It resulted in a vast polemic literature of learned character, and aroused interest in linguistic studies of the Chinese.<sup>46</sup> One of the most persistent adherents to the hypothesis was Jean Jacques d'Ortous de Mairan (1678-1771) of the Académie des Sciences, who in his famous letters<sup>47</sup> to Dominique Parrenin (1665-1741), a Jesuit sinologue of the highest authority<sup>48</sup> in Peking, found similarities in the early history of Egypt and China. He tried even to convince the learned sinologue that Sesostri I (1970-1935 B. C.) came to China with a hundred thousand Egyptians.<sup>49</sup> Parrenin in a series of letters, but especially in his last letter dated Peking, September 28, 1735,<sup>50</sup> strongly rejected Mairan's continuation of the unscientific Kircherian theory. Joseph de Guignes (1721-1800),<sup>51</sup> member of the Académie des Inscriptions, joined this polemical exchange of opinion with his famous paper (published in 1759 and again in 1760<sup>52</sup>) *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne*. The memoir attempted to defeat the generally accepted opinion formulated by Parrenin. De Guignes returned to the defense of Kircher when he realized that he was encountering the opposition of the French orientalists, and even of the members of the Royal Society in London. He decided now to use his authority as a member of the Académie des Inscriptions to publish in the *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions* his article entitled:

<sup>46</sup> See H. Cordier, *Bibliotheca Sinica*, vol. III, cols. 1577-1588.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Lettres de M. de Mairan au R. P. Parrenin, missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus à Peking. Contenant diverses questions sur la Chine*. Paris, Chez Desaint et Saillant, 1759.

<sup>48</sup> See L. Pfister, *Notices*, I, 501-517; H. Cordier, *Bibliotheca Sinica*, vol. I, cols. 57-60; C. Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque*, vol. VI, cols. 284-291.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Lettres de M. de Mairan*, p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Lettres édifiantes*, 24°. This letter is not listed by Cordier; my title is taken from the copy in the British Museum. In *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, nouvelle édition (Lyon, 1819), the letter is inserted into vol. XII, pp. 167-204. The first publication appeared in the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, XXIV recueil. A Paris, chez Nicolas Le Clerc, et P. G. Le Mercier, MDCCXXXIX.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *Biographie universelle* (Michaud), XVIII, 126-129; H. Cordier, *ibid.*, vol. I, cols. 562-563, 571-572; vol. III, cols. 1735, 1745.

<sup>52</sup> A Paris, Chez Desaint et Saillant, 1759; second ed., 1760.

*Bibliotheca Sinica*, II, 1392-1393; L. Pfister, *Notices*, I, 307-313, 321-329, 363-367, 333-338; C. Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque*, II, 1562-1566; IV, 296-299, 640-643; VII, 230-231.

<sup>43</sup> P. LXXI: "Quod si vero Chinam removerimus ab Assyriorum commercio, multo magis removenda Aegyptus: et quamvis aliquae hieroglyphicae litterae Sinenses cum Aegyptiis similitudinem habere a quibusdam asseratur, cur non potius Aegyptios a Sinensibus, qui aliquot saeculis praecesserunt, quam ab Aegyptiis Sinenses originem trahere debere contenditur?"

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 623.

<sup>45</sup> For a general review of the theories on the origin of Chinese civilization see Henri Cordier's *Histoire générale de la Chine*, I, 3-37, chapter I, "Origine des Chinois: théories étrangères."

"Mémoire dans lequel, après avoir examiné l'origine des lettres phéniciennes, hébraïques, hiéroglyphique et symbolique des Égyptiens se retrouve dans les caractères des Chinois, et que la nation chinoise est une colonie égyptienne."<sup>53</sup>

After him, Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727-1780),<sup>54</sup> a prominent French sinologue and Jesuit missionary in China, energetically supported J. de Guignes and defended the Kircherian theory in his letter from Peking, anonymously published in Bruxelles, 1773:

*Lettre de Pékin, sur le Génie de la Langue Chinoise, et la nature de leur écriture symbolique, comparée avec celle des anciens Égyptiens; en réponse à celle de la Société Royale des Sciences de Londres, sur le même sujet: On y a joint l'extrait de deux ouvrages nouveaux de Mr. De Guignes, de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres de Paris, relatifs aux mêmes matiers. Par un Pere de la Compagnie de Jesus, Missionnaire à Pekin.*<sup>55</sup>

There were many of varying qualities of scholarship who participated in the quarrel, but one of the last important epigons of the Kircherian controversy was Dr. Terrien de Lacouperie (d. 1894), professor at the University of London,<sup>56</sup> who fought in his numerous papers for the recognition of the "origin from Babylonia and Elam of the early Chinese civilization."<sup>57</sup> His idea was a slightly modified theory of Kircher, since Lacouperie accepted the culture of Egypt and Babylonia as identical. However, he gave preference to the geographical proximity of Babylonia to China.

In addition to the controversies which he stirred up, Athanasius Kircher by his theory of Egypto-Chinese affinities, as he conceived them, aroused

the strong interest of his contemporaries in linguistic and cultural studies of the affinities of the Mediterranean world with Eastern Asia. It was not yet a scientific approach to comparative philology, or universal history, but undoubtedly it was a beginning in the history of linguistic science.

G. W. Leibniz (1646-1716) is credited with the new beginning of linguistic science. He is so credited by an outstanding scholar, Holger Pedersen, of the University of Copenhagen, who maintains that Leibniz is the foremost figure in the formulation of the problem of the relationship of languages.<sup>58</sup> Pedersen says that Leibniz "on the material available at that time, though he (Leibniz) does not cite the sources of his knowledge, . . . tried to construct a comprehensive system of linguistic genealogy." But it should be remarked that Leibniz did not advance his system beyond the Kircherian *systema* formulated in the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, and supported for practical application in the *Polygraphia nova et universalis*. The great Leibniz does not give the source of his knowledge, but, in my opinion, he undoubtedly got it from Kircher. He also, like Kircher, assumed that the languages of Europe and Asia (including Egypt) are descended from one and the same language. In this case it is not important whether the Kircherian primary language was Hebrew,—refuted by Leibniz,—or the "lingua Adamica,"—as accepted by Leibniz<sup>59</sup>—or some other "mother language," as Kircher termed it. The kinship between languages set up by Kircher does not differ from Leibniz's approach; and Leibniz quite early followed Kircher's linguistic writings as is evident from his *Disertatio de arte combinatoria*.<sup>60</sup> The character and the scope of the present article makes it impossible to discuss in detail how Leibniz followed Kircher. Nevertheless, it may be stated that the history of linguistic science might be pushed back from Leibniz to Kircher.

<sup>53</sup> Vol. XXIX, pp. 1-26. Paris, 1764.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. C. Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque*, vol. II, cols. 1167-1169; Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques*, vol. II, 890-902. H. Cordier, *Bibliotheca Sinica*, vol. II, col. 1061.

<sup>55</sup> A Bruxelles, chez J. L. De Boubiers, Imprimeur-Libraire. MDCC.LXXIII. Avec Approbation & Permission.

<sup>56</sup> For the sinological studies of Prof. Albert Étienne Jean Baptiste Terrien de Lacouperie see E. H. Parker's "M. Terrien de La Couperie as a Sinologist," *China Review* (XIII), 301-305; *The Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. XIX (London, 1921), pp. 559-560; H. Cordier, *Bibliotheca Sinica*, vol. I, 577-579; vol. II, 1374-1375; vol. III, 1743.

<sup>57</sup> Terrien de Lacouperie, "On the History of the Archaic Chinese Writing and Text," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XIV (1882); "Origin from Babylonia and Elam of the Early Chinese Civilisation. A Summary of the Proofs," *Babylonian and Oriental Record*, III (1889), 62-223.

<sup>58</sup> Holger Pedersen, *Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century: Methods and Results*, translated from the Danish by John Webster Spargo (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), pp. 9-10.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *God. Guil. Leibnitii opera philosophica quae exstant: Latina, Gallica, Germanica, omnia*, ed. by Joannes Eduardus Erdmann (Berolini, 1840), the treatise XI, *De scientia universali seu calculo philosophico*, p. 82a.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, treatise II, pp. 7a, 27a. The correspondence of Leibniz, published in 6 vols. by the Prussian Academy (1923-1938), gives in many places evidence of Leibniz's appreciation of Kircher's learning and writings.

*Orientalis*  
**ATHANASII KIRCHERI**  
**E SOC. IESV.**  
**OE D I P V S**  
**AEGYPTIACVS.**

*HOC EST*

**Vniuersalis Hieroglyphicæ Veterum**  
**Doctrinæ temporum iniuria abolitæ**  
**INSTAVRATIO.**

**Opus ex omni Orientalium doctrina & sapientia**  
**conditum, nec non viginti diuersarum linguarum,**  
**authoritate stabilitum,**

*Felicibus Auspicijs*

**FERDINANDI III.**  
**AVSTRIACI**

**Sapientissimi & Inuictissimi**

**Romanorum Imperatoris semper Augusti**  
**è tenebris erutum,**

**Atque Bono Reipublicæ Literariæ consecratum.**

**Tomus I.**



**R O M A E,**

**Ex Typographia Vitalis Mafcardi, M DC LII.**

**SVPERIORVM PERMISSV.**

The title page of A. Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, in which he explained his system of language relationship and formulated his theory of the origin of Chinese language and culture.